

by Bob Saydlowski, Jr.

# E-mu Systems SP-1200 Sampling Percussion System

The E-mu Systems *SP-1200* sampling percussion computer is the "new, improved" version of E-mu's Model *SP-12* drum computer. The unit has twice the internal memory and double the sampling time of the *SP-12*. Double-sided, double-density B'A" disks are used for sound storage and retrieval. Each disk can contain up to 32 sounds, 100 segments, and 100 songs, stored in 12-bit linear data format.

All controls are split into modules on the slanted face panel of the *SP-1200*, and an LED window constantly gives pertinent and complete information relating to the function you're currently working in. (The window is a bit difficult to read in certain lighting, unless you're right on top of it.)

The Master Control section allows you to set tempo and either increase or decrease its value (from 40 - 240 BPM) via push buttons. Another button in this section controls all data entry, and rotary knobs are used to adjust mix volume and metronome volume. Below these is a 10-button keypad (set up like a *Touch-Tone* phone). It is here that segments and songs are selected and data values entered. The keypad also enables you to verify/respond to various computer questions during the course of operation.

The Performance module contains eight play buttons that, when tapped, produce the sound allocated to the specific channel. The unit has four sound banks, selectable by a single button. A small LED marker is used to designate the bank selected. (Other LED markers are found in other modules as well.) There are other buttons in this section used for Run/Stop, Record/Edit, and Tap/Repeat, so you can manually set the metronome. The machine computes the elapsed time between taps (beats) and sets your metronome for you accordingly. Each channel also has its own slider, which controls such variables as tuning, decay, and mix volume.

Located near the base of the unit is the *SP-1200's* disk drive, complete with LED light and eject button. The Disk control module has ten functions: it can save all sequences, save all songs, load all sequences or load all songs separately,



load specific sequence and song numbers, load all disk information at once, list sequences and sounds on the disk by number or name, and there is a format/copy software function.

The Sync module enables the *SP-1200* to synchronize to one of several different tempo references, such as internal clock, MIDI clock, SMPTE clock, or external clock. It can also write a 24-pulse click track or SMPTE time code signal on tape, as well as serve as a master timing reference to which other instruments can synchronize.

In a major improvement over the *SP-12*, the *SP-1200* has ten seconds of sampling time, arranged in four 2.5 second banks. The Sample module controls input gain, voice assignment, preamp level, threshold level, and sample length, and also produces a VU meter display on the LED window. The unit has two sampling methods: threshold-sensitive (for short signals), or forced (for more continuous sample signals).

When you're ready to program segments or songs, the Programming section is your next move. This module has six levels of auto-correct and five different "swing-factor" settings (to displace beats by a certain ratio). There are many other functions that allow you to set time signatures or bar length, shorten or lengthen a segment, record in real or step time, erase complete segments or just certain notes,

and copy or append segments. When constructing songs,

you can insert or delete steps, repeat steps, set tempo and program any tempo changes, jump to a subsong, and, if desired, program trigger outputs to drive outboard synths, sequencers, etc. All of these functions are easily called up at the push of a button.

I should also mention that the *SP-1200* lets you be your own mix engineer, using the sliders in the Performance section. The unit can memorize up to eight different mixes. Different mixes can be stored for different songs or song sections.

The Set-Up section of the unit has still more impressive functions. All drum sounds can be tuned as the user desires, or have their decay altered. The manual play buttons themselves can be transformed into dynamically responsive buttons, so that the harder you hit the button, the louder the drum sound will be.

Any sound can be pitched throughout the eight play buttons to span one octave. I found this extremely useful when programming bass guitar patterns, and I can imagine what could happen during creative drum-sound programming! A Multi-Level function spreads the sound throughout, with each button giving an increased vol-

ume. Both of these functions are displayed bar-graph style in the LED info window. Reverse-sound effects can be obtained, giving the possibility of backwards cymbals, snare drums, etc. Sounds can be swapped, copied, or assigned to different output channels. There are several memory functions, too, allowing the user to check remaining memory, clear only sound memory, sequence memory, or clear the entire SP-1200 memory (which should be done after your great sounds and patterns are saved to disk!) When sampling your own sounds, this module also allows you to name them. Besides all of what you've read so far, the SP-1200 is full-blown MIDI operable.

The rear of the unit has a "A" mono-mix output jack, as well as eight separate "A" channel outputs, which can be filtered or unfiltered, since different sampled sounds respond better to filtering. There are also jacks for MIDI In, Out, and Thru, SMPTE output, metronome/clock output, sample input, SMPTE/Sync input, plus the facility for three footswitches for remote operation.

The SP-1200 stores all information in RAM, which is lost every time power is shut off. So you must load a disk in whenever you begin to use the unit. (Disk loading and storage takes about 20 - 30 seconds—much less time than the SP-12 takes.)

Five factory-sampled disks come with the SP-1200. Sounds on these disks include acoustic and electronic drums,

cymbals, congas, timbales, bongos, hand percussion, timpani, symphonic effects, and even electric guitar. I heard five additional E-mu disks as well, containing more acoustic and electronic drumkits, gated drums, sound effects, ethnic percussion, hand claps, bass guitar, synthesizer, etc. All of E-mu's digitized factory samples are extremely clean and crisp, and very useable! They really have to be heard to be fully appreciated. However, if you want other sounds, all you need to do is go out and buy a blank disk and sample your own. It's also possible to load sounds from different disks onto one blank disk, making

your own "custom" disk.

The SP-1200 is a magical machine with exceptional features. E-mu has apparently left out nothing, and in all honesty, I had quite a ball putting the unit through its paces (with help from the 120-page owner's manual). The SP-1200 is compatible with the SP-12 sound library, and there are hundreds more sounds available from independent "sound manufacturers." (E-mu's disks retail at \$19.95 each.) For \$2995 retail, E-mu supplies you with one of the best-sounding and most flexible percussion machine samplers on the market.



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